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ABSTRACT

Technological apparatus--including video tapes, television sets, tape cassettes, tape players, phonograph records, films, and film projectors--is inappropriate for humanities classroom instruction and should be relegated to libraries and language labs. Post experience in trying to teach freshman rhetoric using specially prepared visual tapes on television showed both student resentment and boredom, and failure to effectively teach writing, a skill which depends on the instructor's personal attention. Because the literature and language which enhance and perpetuate the humanity of people were developed and are used by living people, they should be taught by living people. (JM)

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An Anti-Media Message for the English Classroom

by
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Ladies and Gentlemen:

In view of this convention's motif "What Are We Doing When We Do What We Do?" I have developed for you "An Anti-Media Message for the English Classroom."

Let me offer you the deliniation of this title, "An Anti-Media Message for the English Classroom," by basically defining the key words within it:

"Anti-Media" means, of course, against media. And Media includes technological items like video tapes, television sets, tape cassettes, tape players, phonograph records, films and their projectors.
The "English Classroom" is the particular place to which this anti-Media message refers. This message may be appropriate to other than English classrooms--the Sociological or the Scientific classrooms, for examples--but such other classrooms are not my concern here. My concern here is with our English classrooms--those classrooms wherein we teach our common language and/or our cultivated Literature. I mention Literature in this 4C context and setting because many of us, of course, are involved in writing themes about Literature. (I myself teach both "sheer" composition, as I call it, and composition which analyzes Literature.)

Furthermore, I am not opposing myself, on the present occasion, to Media in general (tho my concern about Media misuse and madness in general increases daily). In particular I am concerned about Media as it affects and infects our English classrooms.

Thus I deliver to you my "Anti-Media Message for the English Classroom."

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Let me offer you some background of the distrustful position I now take toward Media in the English classroom.

In 1970 at Sacred Heart University, we made a large mistake trying to teach Freshman Rhetoric via television. We prepared visual tapes locally and fed them into four TV sets simultaneously in separate classrooms. The decision to teach Freshman Rhetoric thus was made from a financial viewpoint primarily--not from an academic one. Well we saved money; but, among other things, we probably lost potential English majors. And we certainly lost student morale.

The students simply turned the program off.

As Director of Freshman English, I received many, many adverse student comments about the televised/mediafied program, frequently along this line:

"I didn't know the guy on that tube."

"He was just a face and voice to me."

"I've got TV at home, if I want it."

After listening to many such comments, I began to think, and I began to see, that what was especially being indicated was a reaction against depersonalization.

Notice the implied wish to "know" the person teaching and the disdain in the low colloquial words "guy" and "tube."
"I didn't know the guy on that tube."

Notice the implied wish for personalization in the statement:
"He was <u>just</u> a face and voice to me."

Notice the implication that TV viewing is a rather ordinary experience and the further implication that something more is expected in the classroom: "I've got TV at home, <u>if</u> I want it."

And we undertook this televised Freshman Rhetoric Program after consulting, and in spite of, a 1968-69 study by West Virginia University which strongly advised against televised Freshman Rhetoric. Here is an incisive sentence from that study's conclusion--a sentence which has attracted much more of my attention since our Media-madcap than before it, unhappily.

> While television seems to work successfully in teaching courses which depend upon the acquisition of a large body of information, it does not seem effective in teaching a skill like writing, which is best done in small groups where a student is guaranteed the individualized and personal attention of his instructor.

Two significant suggestions of this key concluding sentence stand forth for our consideration:

1. the suggestion that media may be appropriate and useful in classrooms concerned with transmitting a great deal of basic fact. (But the Humanities classroom is not to be concerned with mere memorizing.)

2. the suggestion that developing the talent of writing requires personal attention, with the important implication that personalization is very desirable in the humane disciplines.

From all these impressions I have established a major premise:

> The effective undergraduate Humanities classroom experience depends upon a personal conveyance of material from teacher to student.

And a minor premise:

> Media depersonalizes.

But before I could draw a formal conclusion, my mind was in tift and relevant thoughts were occurring to me, to wit:

Not only does media depersonalize, it also thereby detracts. It detracts subtly in the following manner:

> If an artificial, mediafied someone-else does the presenting a teacher should be doing in his or her classroom, it damages the personal element and thereby detracts from the personal recommendation of the material the teacher is making to his or her students. For example:
>
> 1. In the area of teaching composition, a resort to casettes dealing with punctuation, sentences, or paragraphs subtly indicts the teacher of not grasping these matters firmly himself. And his personal example that writing principles can be firmly grasped and understood is thereby damaged.
>
> 2. Likewise, in the area of literature, the classroom reading aloud of great works by some recorded personage subtly suggests to students that those works are somehow/somewhat beyond the reach of "ordinary" people--like themselves, or even the teacher in that classroom.

The formal conclusion I finally drew--and at this point recommend for your consideration--is this:

> The cluttering of a Humanities classroom with technological apparatus for artificial presentations is unacceptable because a Humanities teacher is personally responsible to enliven works by living people for living people about life--and that includes the teaching of our very living language.

One of our colleagues (in fact, a fellow faculty member of mine), Dr. Donald Coonley, a media specialist, in a recent article has made some passing remarks with which I am inclined to agree; but he presents ultimately a media-oriented view with which I must respectfully disagree. Writing in the Connecticut English Journal, Winter 1973 issue, Dr. Coonley rightly warns teachers:

> Above all else you should know why you bring media...into the classroom... Few [students] will accept reasons like "films supplement our other class materials," or "variety aids learning." The students will think such pneumatic phrases mean that their teacher is too lazy to do anything else. And they might be right.

Dr. Coonley obviously has a telling point against academic laziness. He goes on to tell that:

> Too many teachers...have transformed classrooms into audio-visual massage parlors.

With these passing points of his I do basically agree. But with the ultimate thrust of his article I do decidedly disagree. Indeed he ultimately suggests that teachers not media-oriented are "guilty" and/or "diseased."

He states:

> Many of us traditionally-schooled persons suffer a vague sense of guilt when using media.

Then he proceeds to offer "some suggestions on how to prevent media guilt." Finally observing that "Teachers of humanities...seem prone toward a fear of machines," Dr. Coonley suggests that "the disease [so he terms it] is caused mainly by attitude, not lack of mechanical aptitude."

Ladies and Gentlemen,

If a relative ban on media in the Humanities classroom is indeed a disease, then I, for one, plead "guilty" to having that "disease." And I recommend that teachers of the Humanities, and writing, and writing about the Humanities, catch and keep that disease--and thereby keep contraptions out of their classrooms.

Let me offer you three illustrations recently developed during field research for this Anti-Media Message. Although not all three relate directly to the college English classroom, they all indicate the subtle yet real negative effect which most media contains while transmitting material.

1. A recent interview with a 3.93 QPA senior woman student who went thru that televised Freshman Rhetoric course disclosed these significant viewpoints:
   a. The students in the class were, for the mostpart, simply bored. A few (herself included) were aggravated.
   b. In general she reacts very negatively to media in the classroom--because she can't talk to it and personally respond.
   c. Generally she feels that a teacher bringing media into a classroom doesn't want to be bothered preparing that class.
   d. She submitted that, in her experience, even language labs create student resentment. Students generally try to get out of them--because they involve a passive listening process and/or impersonal responses to a machine.
   e. Overall she usually feels "uncomfortable" in the presence of media.

2. A recent interview with a professional-woman, head dietitian of a Boston Hospital, disclosed media depersonalization. She reported listening to and tape recording a dynamic and interesting talk at a convention in Pittsburg. Yet upon its taped replay to a local group, it failed to stir any notable response--except audience apathy.

   The taping, of course, could not convey the dynamic personality of the speaker.

3. Even a recent brief conversation with a 5th grade girl who was being subjected to film-stripped literature disclosed the same negative effect of media depersonalization. Here is that conversation recorded and quoted verbatim:

> "We're doing mythology now, with film strips."
> "How do you like it?"
> "It's boring."
> "How come?"
> "We just sit there and watch."
> "Would you rather have the teacher telling you about it?"
> "I sure would. It was a lot more fun doing exercises around the class."

Just these three illustrations from grade-school to college to the work-a-day world indicate widespread negative effect of media based on its depersonalizing quality.

But, after all, my particular concern on this occasion is with the Humanities classroom.

So, in conclusion, I am finally, ultimately recommending that we teachers of language and the Humanities become and remain vigilant against the incursion of machines into our classrooms. For the nature of technological machinery is opposed extremely to human nature. And we humanities people--more than others--must guard against machinery's depersonalizing takeover of the Humanities classroom, if not indeed of life.

Let us bear in mind the sensible notion that a new idea is not necessarily a good idea--it is merely a new idea--until tested by intelligent people for adoption or discard.

And I, for one, have decided in the main to discard media from my classroom. Accordingly I recommend to you that you relegate records and tapes and turntables and electric reels to the libraries and to the language labs. Keep such technological paraphenalia under control; keep it out of the classrooms; keep it adjunct to, subordinate to, the personal Humanities classroom experience.

Call me old-fashioned.

I believe that the literature and the language that enhance and perpetuate our humanity were developed by living people, for living people, to be conveyed between live people in person.

I'm old-fashioned.

I'm against artificial dissemination.